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## ELEMENTARY LANGUAGE TRAINING AS ART TRAINING

Psychologists tell us that art in its fundamental meaning is actual skill, practice, doing. Science teaches us to know, and art to do. Among our usual school "studies," so-called, some add to our intelligence and increase our knowledge, such as history, higher mathematics, biology, geography, grammar, literature; others, as reading, writing, drawing, music, serve largely to develop skill, and may be termed art "studies." It is in this broad but fundamentally true sense that I wish to use the word *art*.

Language is the vehicle of thought. It is the means of expressing either the most simple or the most complex ideas. As the means to an end, its importance depends upon its ability to serve that end. The thought, the idea, is of first importance; the expression exists for the sake of the thought which it utters. Even the simplest language is art. Its quality improves in proportion to the skill developed in its use.

Obviously—whether in foreign or native languages—the primary object of language training is skill. The student desires the power to use the language easily, accurately, and effectively; yet not for the sake of the language itself, but that he may be able to perceive or express the thought readily, without expending conscious effort upon the process. But in order that the instrument of expression may be used with power and ease, and without conscious effort, the handling of it must be *learned*, indeed a high degree of skill in its use must be developed. Language training is thus primarily training for skill, it must contribute immediately

to the readiness and accuracy of actual use, rather than add to the store of knowledge of the learner. In a word, language training must be fundamentally art training, i.e., actual practice with the thing itself, as a means of expression.

Here, then, are two facts of the very greatest significance in language teaching: 1) the expression of the thought, or idea, should be the focus of the student's attention; and 2) language training is essentially art training, and should be developed as such. Neither of these facts seems to be given sufficient consideration, either in the current theoretical discussions of foreign language teaching, or in the practice of the class-room.

For the great majority of American students the object of foreign language study is admittedly the ability to read, rather than to write or to speak idiomatically. Hence this discussion may be confined for practical reasons to the acquiring of a "reading knowledge."

In his book, "Teaching the Language Arts,"\* Hinsdale says of reading, that it may be a *mechanical*-mental art, or a *purely* mental art. The first expression implies that the pupil must recognize the symbols of the printed page, the letters singly or in combination, also the vocal values of these symbols, singly or in combination, as well as the significance of the same, i.e., he must understand the meanings of words. If he can do all this he *can read*. But of the purely mental art of reading Hinsdale says: "When thus employed the student's attention is no longer fixed on the mere art; the use of the tool has become mainly automatic, while the matter of the page absorbs the mind." This, he says, "is the end to which all instruction in the art or mechanism of reading should be directed."

To the little child, for the first time being initiated into the mysteries of the printed page, the mere alphabet offers very real difficulties. The various vocal values of certain letters and combinations of letters are extremely confusing, and the process of word-building is a tedious one. But even with these little ones our elementary teachers have discovered that it is possible and practicable to teach to *read the thought* and not a succession of words. After two months of such training the pupils "talk what

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\*N. Y. 1896. Chap. xiii.

they read." How many foreign language students read words only, after two, three, and four years of training—or the lack of it?

To the average high school or college student, with his previous knowledge of the alphabet, these mechanical difficulties are very materially reduced. Most of the symbols he knows, the vocal values of many of them correspond to those in his own language, and with a fair degree of co-operation between teacher and student the others may be quickly mastered. To our mature foreign language students the appreciation of the thought for its own sake furnishes at least as cogent an incentive as in the case of the children. It would seem that there is every reason for beginning at the earliest possible moment to teach our students reading as a purely mental art. Let them learn from the first day to read the thought, and not mere words. This is the vital thing, the spirit of reading. It is the end and object of our teaching. It is an art, a matter of skill, to be acquired by practice. The practice therefore should begin as early as may be possible or practicable.

How soon may this be?

It may be—and should be—the purpose from the first week to use the language tool automatically, sub-consciously, while the mind occupies itself chiefly or wholly with the matter, the thought. The secret of the successful application of this principle lies not in paucity of ideas submitted to the beginner, nor in denying him sight or sound of the accusative case, for example, until he knows everything about the nominative. The secret does lie in reading very simple but attractive matter, expressed in the simplest possible words and constructions. The earliest material may even be already familiar to the students in English, in which case the novelty of finding the old idea in a new form assists the student to look upon the new language as a means for expressing thought. Since the language is simple and the thought attractive, the learner makes the effort to *master the expression* of the thought, *and finds that he can do it*. The foreign expression he makes his own, and the thought soon becomes familiar to him in that dress also. As he goes on from day to day mastering the simplest ideas in this way, he discovers before a half year is gone that he is actually *possessed* in part of a new power, the power to use the language tool automatically for the sake of the thought.

The reflex effect of such a consciousness upon the student's

will to work is extremely beneficial. Welton says in his "Principles and Methods of Teaching"<sup>1</sup>: "It is the very essence of effective teaching to awaken desire and to evoke purpose." It is not a mere artificial "interest" in the *subject matter*, which in itself could not possibly attract all students equally. But when the desire has been aroused to "read for the thought," and its realization proved to be attainable, the purpose to master the intervening difficulties, and to persevere until the goal is reached is quickened and developed by the sense of appreciable progress made.

If the consciousness of the learner is focused upon the thought, he aims not at memorizing a large list of words and certain rules for their combination into sentences, but he masters the expression of a thought; a whole phrase, a whole sentence, become his, simply as the expression for the idea with which he is concerned. In this way new words are associated with old ones in new phrases, genders are associated with nouns, the relative position of parts of the sentence soon becomes familiar in practice; in short, a multitude of details begin to be taken care of by that sub-consciousness which plays so important a role in all activities which depend upon skill, and which in the language art we call Sprachgefühl. It is this sub-conscious association of words—having its origin in imitation and its development through practice—which suggests so readily the phrases of every-day speech, so that we use multitudes of combinations without hesitation. It is that also which makes it possible for us to follow the address of a speaker not all of whose separate words we are able to hear. Our sub-consciousness supplies such parts of phrases as the ear has failed to catch.

"All education is self-education," and "all learning is by doing" are psychological axioms. Surely the formation of habit lies in repeated practice, and the development of right habits is all-important in language work. In so far as the language processes are committed to the sub-conscious activity of the brain, the mind is left free to grasp the essential thing, the thought. This is the acknowledged goal of language training. The formation of such habits should therefore begin at once, before false practices have developed.

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<sup>1</sup>Baltimore, 1909.

The *idea* must be prominent at all times, no matter what is the form of the class exercise. If the class is reading, no one is permitted to read words. If there is a discussion of the content of the lesson, there should be no mere quizzing of the class. Ideas are exchanged with them, involving of course the use of the subject matter and the language of the assignment. If there must be a little translation into English now and then, the accurate reproduction of the thought is made prominent. The students listen with open ears and closed books as the phrase or sentence is read to them. The thought is required accurately and instantly in English. Such a method may be used to advantage in later practice in translating English exercises, where such work is insisted upon. The thought remains constant; the pupils are required to express it in one language or the other with equal facility and accuracy. It goes without saying, of course, that no phrases should be used, with whose expression in the foreign language the students have not had ample opportunity to become familiar by use. Even translation may thus be made to contribute in a limited way to the development of the student's power to handle the expression of the whole thought as a unit. The most logical means of attaining the desired skill is the continued oral use of the language, i.e., constant practice with the tool itself.

No more valid argument for oral methods of language teaching can be given than that they demand the greatest familiarity with the medium of expression. The ready *expression* of the idea in the foreign language phrase indicates an even greater degree of intimate knowledge of the necessary expressions than does the ready comprehension of the idea in either language. The student who learns to read and *speak* will *read* more fluently, will read the thought more immediately, than the student who learns merely to read, other things being equal, because his sub-conscious association of words with ideas has been more complete. The handling of the tool of language requires less conscious effort. The initial effort is greater, the natural inertia of teacher and pupil must be overcome; but the resulting gain in facility of command in reading is disproportionately great, and the irksomeness of the recitation largely disappears, for student and teacher.

Granting for the sake of the argument that language teaching is art training, involving primarily the development of skill and

not the acquiring of scientific knowledge; and granting that by the use of a simple text it is possible to practise reading from the first as a purely mental art, thereby laying deserved emphasis upon the thought unit: does it follow that we must exclude the analysis and conscious building of sentences and phrases in order to clarify and fix accurately in the student's consciousness a definite standard of language usage? Certainly not. But it does follow that such assembling of knowledge *about* the language must be reduced to its proper place as an auxiliary to purely language training.

In the sense of the fore-going the "grammar-translation" method is wholly unsatisfactory and inadequate for elementary work. In its place we find widely used what I shall call an "inductive-grammar" method. No one will doubt that grammar is more helpful to the student, its principles are more thoroughly assimilated, when taught inductively, or, more accurately, when the pupil is assisted to deduce the statement of grammatical principles from sentences with which he has become familiar. But after all, this is a grammar method. Grammar is the object of the instruction. There is some demand for "oral practice," to be sure. Why? To "fix the grammar" more thoroughly. Grammar is made the sole object of the drill, in place of skill in language expression.

No one will deny that the most thorough drill in grammar as such is necessary. But grammar instruction, however administered, must follow and supplement language practice, instead of taking precedence in time and importance.

An examination of each new Beginner's Book in German leaves one with the same feeling of dissatisfaction. They are "inductive-grammar" books. Each contains a few lines of narrative here, an anecdote there, and a poem elsewhere, just enough to furnish subject matter upon which to base exercises. These teach the nominative case in the first and second lessons, and the accusative in the third, the dative in the sixth, etc. Each book must by all means include as "Realien" all the furniture of the class-room, and the pupil's outfit of pencils and books; just the sort of detail which does not need to be included in a text, because every teacher will naturally at some time use just that material with his class, unless he is entirely dead to his surroundings.

Constant drill with sentences about the desk and chairs is not inspiring, and the Procrustean manner in which the language expression is compelled to conform to the aim of the grammar instruction cannot be without its effect upon the pupil. He soon learns to "get his grammar" first, and "do his sentences" afterwards, which is scarcely in accord with the spirit of the inductive method.

It is evident that if the language course is to teach thought expression from the beginning, the reading text should be carefully selected to that end. In the first place the language must be well chosen and simple, so that the absorption of the mind upon the thought is not seriously disturbed. It must lend itself readily to conversational practice. The mastery of the language tool must be quickly gained, and maintained, or the attention is distracted by the difficulties of the use of the tool. Conversation or the use of the tool, should be employed throughout as the logical method of securing and developing the greatest familiarity with the instrument.

Furthermore, if the formation of right habits of language practice is so vital as has been indicated, all grammar instruction must be excluded from the first days of work, as has been suggested above, preferably for three weeks or *more*, until the practice of reproducing expressions as a whole has begun to be habitual. Even then true inductive grammar work should be taken up slowly and with insight into the needs of the class. For this reason also the reading text must be simple at the beginning, with simple constructions and much repetition of words and phrases. Vocabulary and constructions should be such as would contribute to a useful speaking knowledge, for in the speaking vocabulary of a language we find the most practical expressions. But in spite of the simplicity there must be spirit and life in the story and style.

The material which most satisfactorily fulfills the requirements suggested above is not a series of anecdotes, nor a poem, nor riddles and rhymes, nor even an encyclopedic collection of information about the foreign people and their land, although all of these may be used to give variety to the course. The best material is narrative. Here there is a sequence of events which makes it easy to recall the facts; there is no witty turn which makes it



necessary to memorize a certain wording, or lose the point of the joke; and the language is that of ordinary conversation.

It follows, that the usual beginner's books are not highly suitable or adequate for elementary language training in the sense of art training. They lack the desired reading matter, and their object is primarily grammar instruction.

It is apparent that the proper emphasis upon the thought from the beginning exercises the greatest influence upon the choice of subject matter. Attention has previously been directed to its effect upon the volition of students. It "evokes the purpose" to master the language as the expression of thought. We shall see that it affects in as fundamental a way the student's methods of study and the spirit and aim and methods of the recitation. In a word, insistence upon the expression of thought as the central principle of language training implies that language training shall be art training.

Let us examine the methods of developing skill in art. They are imitation, practice, criticism. The man who becomes skillful with artisan's tools first observes and imitates, then practises under supervision and direction of his work, and if he is fortunate he receives criticism which assures him of his excellence in certain details, and enables him to correct his faults. The would-be artist undergoes essentially the same manner of training. In each case imitation and practice are essential elements. The criticism is desirable if properly timed and intelligently administered, and is usually not lacking.

The course of language training should be similar. The beginner has the language of teacher and text as models for imitation. As he attempts to reproduce his models his power to imitate, his skill in imitating, is increased through *practice*. As directed by his teachers, his practice increases his power to observe his models closely and therefore to imitate more accurately. He is compelled to exercise minute accuracy, for he has at this time no set of rules to fall back upon. With this intimate handling of the expressions of the model, thoughts and phrases become immediately associated, the strangeness of the new words and order and inflections disappears, and the reproduction of these now familiar expressions becomes spontaneous; they co-ordinate without conscious effort, and we have in the very first weeks

the beginnings of actual language skill. Two habits fundamentally important in language training have begun to form: The habit of close observation and of accurate imitation.

The student's practice is directed by the teacher, according to a definite plan for the development of the beginner's experience with forms and constructions, and leads him gradually but all the more surely to the point, where he not only desires a statement of what is the proper usage, but is also prepared—by reason of his experience—to profit by such criticism of his work. Criticism in the language art implies the knowledge of facts about language usage, that is, grammar. Such grammar is extremely helpful, after a certain basis of skill has been developed. Before that time it is worse than wasted.

Some illustrations of the practical application of the above principle of language training as art training may bear brief mention, showing the far-reaching influence of this fundamental principle 1) upon the preparation of the lesson, and 2) upon the character of the recitation.

In the first place, phonetic difficulties can be mastered quickly by nine out of ten beginners through careful imitation alone, with co-operation between teacher and pupils. The other one in ten should be given detailed instruction in private as to the physical means of producing certain sounds.

Particularly in the first six or eight weeks, the advanced lesson is taught orally, without books. The student learns to grasp the thought in its new form, without translation. The phrases which might cause difficulty are used repeatedly by teacher and class, until they stand as a unit for the thought they convey. By question and answer the teacher satisfies himself that the essential ideas and their expression have been grasped by the class as a whole. When the student uses the text, therefore, he reviews what is already mastered in part. The pronunciation is already familiar; the thought is familiar; the first time he reads, he reads for the thought, with reasonably good sentence accent. He studies the separate words to secure greater accuracy. Following the teacher's suggestions as to methods of study, he not only reads the lesson—aloud, of course—but tests his own familiarity with phrases by framing his own questions and answers based upon the subject matter of the lesson, in this manner preparing

directly for the recitation. Thus vivid impressions are produced; through much repetition of familiar material, the association of ideas with words and whole groups of words becomes immediate, and proper and helpful habits of thought and effort are formed. With the ability to express simple thoughts accurately and spontaneously comes the development of self-confidence and initiative, and the dislike of the recitation disappears.

The recitation is not an examination period but an opportunity for much practice enjoyable in itself. There is life in the class and the teacher is the center of it. He is one of the group. The recitation is "socialized" to the extent that students feel entire freedom to inquire, and the inclination to do so, and to offer additional facts. Corrections are made by the students as well as the teacher. Impressions are made vivid by connecting them with the personal experience of the students, in class and elsewhere. The teacher touches the students personally in such a way as to provoke *re-action*. Interest is stimulated by the rapidity of the conversation and frequently by an original or unexpected point of view. Personal questions are asked, or a sudden turn is given to the thought, connecting the present with a previous conversation. In short, the recitation is rapid, spirited, often personal; that is, it has all the elements of a mutually interesting conversation between friends. And yet, during a large part of the hour, the skillful teacher is obtaining in reply to his questions effective drill upon the forms and the constructions which he has planned for this period.

The recitation ceases to be a quiz, and offers an opportunity for pupil activity and self-expression, under careful direction. This character is maintained from the first day. When the class has begun to form correct habits of language training the instructor is able to introduce, gradually, more and more information *about* the language, until all the elements of the grammar have been studied in a truly inductive manner, and in the foreign language. These facts are then reviewed as grammar to fix them and to make sure that nothing of importance has been omitted. The student thus gains a standard of criticism of his own effort, which has been developed out of his own experience. Above all, thoroughly correct habits of language study have been forming from the first.

To summarize: The teaching of language as art training,

and the focusing of the pupils attention upon the thought from the beginning, influence fundamentally not only the selection of subject matter, and the methods of teaching reading and grammar, but also the student's methods and habits of study, and his volitional attitude and initiative.

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